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Informal Embassy Translation  
Svenska Dagbladet - March 31, 1979

Hope of Being Freed Kept Niedre Going - Nocturnal Nightmares About Gulag  
By Ingemar Lindmarker

"It's remarkable" Laimons Niedre says and smiles briefly. "Every night in camp I dreamt about Swedish summer. Every night since coming home I have been dreaming about the camp."

The nightmare is over, but the dreams are still there. After nine months in Soviet prisons, Laimons Niedre is back home in Tumba (outside of Stockholm), a remarkably unbroken person, but restless and still mentally on an island in the Gulag Archipelago.

The one-room apartment in the high-rise apartment building now has new souvenirs; the worn spoon of the prisoner; chocolate bars from the day he was set free, a bottle of Russian eau-de-cologne from a fellow prisoner.

In the security of Swedish reality, Laimons Niedre sorts out his dreams. Skinny, with a prison haircut, he tries to understand what happened and how he has changed. At times his voice cracks and he blinks his eyes when he talks about his fear and solitude.

"I know now that I would never have survived ten years in the camp. The isolation, the meaningless existence, would have crushed me in just a few years", he says in his accented but perfect Swedish.

Was Laimons Niedre a spy?

A quick smile goes over his face and he denies this. The accusations in Riga were incomprehensible to him. It was absurd that the KGB officers tried to get his CIA number out of him.

But perhaps Niedre did have a premonition as to what was coming when he left Tumba last summer and went to Tallinn. He had made up his mind that this was to be his last trip. He had a feeling that the seemingly innocent traffic in film could be dangerous.

Niedre had in his possession film taken by his Latvian countryman, Janis Skudra, for the book "Diary of the Occupied Latvia". Skudra planned to show in words and pictures the churches which were deteriorating the most, but also included in his text information regarding "closed-off areas" and local information about military installations.

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The newspaper article paints Niedre's interrogation in somewhat starker terms than that conveyed through Hirdman. The latter said that Niedre described the interrogation process as proper with no intimidation, no interviews longer than two hours at a stretch and no deprivation of food or sleep. There was also no effort to link Niedre with US intelligence agencies in the interrogation while a brief questioning of a possible link with West German intelligence based on a Niedre trip to Germany was soon dropped after adequate explanations were given. Hirdman's account is similar to the newspaper article in ascribing the worst conditions to the period in Kalinin although Hirdman felt that this was more the accident of local custodial ideosyncracies than any specific intent.

Niedre discussed the plethora of camps east of Moscow in the Mordovian ASSR at some length with Hirdman. He described them as adjoining a "special KGB" rail line running from Moscow to Saransk and said that one camp after another was visible in this region from the train. His own small camp for foreigners was said to be located 40-50 kilometers east of Potma after crossing the Moksha River (we could not locate Potma in a Soviet atlas but this is the name given both to Hirdman and in the interview). This camp for 115 foreigners had 45 guards who did not appear to be armed. The inmates included 14 other Westerners, three of whom were Americans, all 14 being held for narcotics offenses. The other foreign prisoners included Chinese, Mongolians, Turks, Koreans, Afghans and others held on a variety of criminal charges. Conditions were described as fair with reading material and light work for pay available. This small camp for foreigners adjoined a larger camp with 2,000 Soviet citizens.

Hirdman confirmed that Niedre had heard no information concerning Raoul Wallenberg or anyone like him. There was talk of one Swede being held somewhere in the camp system but he was described as a much younger man who could not have been Wallenberg.

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"Just come with us! No nonsense!"

It was about an hour after Niedre had come to Tallinn on June 7 last year. Two black Volga cars pulled up beside Niedre and Skudra. Four men rushed out and took the two men by force into different cars.

Skudra has just before this turned over ten rolls of film to Niedre. The plan was to divide the film between Niedre and a relative of his, in order to facilitate taking it out of the country.

What Niedre did not know was that a couple of the films contained texts from Skudra's notes taken during a trip to the Soviet Union.

From the date he was arrested in Tallinn until March 3, 1979, when he suddenly got three letters in camp, Niedre was kept without actual contact with the rest of the world. It was this total isolation and ignorance about the reaction in Sweden which at times threatened to break him down.

He actually did break down, he says, during the KGB detention in Riga. Without contact with anyone other than the men interrogating him he became deeply depressed and cried in despair.

He could live with the threats. The KGB officers warned him openly that he, the spy, would be sent to some place where he would "be killed" or disappear quietly.

"I often thought about Raoul Wallenberg. I had read so much about him and about the Soviet Union. But I never found out anything."

It was not the crude threats that frightened Niedre. It was the endless five months with the KGB, most of the time in a cell by himself, that made him desperate. Long silent days, nights with dreams about Swedish summers.

The interrogation leader was KGB major, V. Leinarts. Niedre remembers him as a correct and tough man. He kept pressing the Swede in daily interrogations, but he could also show sympathy.

"You shouldn't be all that sad" he once told Niedre. "After the trial we will contact Sweden and you will be deported and go home".

It was this hope of deportation which kept Niedre's spirits up. Also, the highest KGB chief in Riga, Avdjukevics, led him to understand that he would only serve a limited prison term. The KGB officers seemed intelligent and capable to Niedre.

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The sentence in November to ten years in prison camp was a serious shock to Niedre. He was convinced that it would take years before he was released and that he would not survive.

"I will not survive this," he told Consul General Alf Ros from Leningrad who was present when the sentence was pronounced.

Ros had classified the trial in the Swedish press as "completely fair". Niedre now says that the Swedish diplomat probably had received a misleading translation from an interpreter in the court room.

When Niedre, a week later, received a copy of the sentence, he underlined with red everything that, according to him, was untrue. It was about 90% of the text.

"Already in Tallinn I had admitted that I had brought out Skudra's material" he says. "But I denied that it contained state secrets, as well as the accusations concerning cooperation with West German and American intelligence, which not even the KGB believed."

After the sentence, there followed four months of transfers with increased feelings of insecurity. First Niedre came to the Butyrka Prison in Moscow, where a high Latvian official from the Soviet Ministry of Interior showed up with "papers from high authorities".

The man recommended that Niedre suggest an exchange between Niedre and some imprisoned Soviet citizen in the West to Swedish diplomats when he met them (but he never had an occasion to meet with Swedish diplomats), or an official Swedish appeal to the Soviet Union to release Niedre "for humanitarian reasons". Moscow was, according to the man, anxious to reach a political solution to the Niedre affair.

What instruction did this official really have from Moscow? Why did the Russians wish to get rid of Niedre?

Laimons Niedre doesn't have an answer to this, even today. As soon as he was sent to the camp he wrote to the Embassy in Moscow that he had important and positive announcements to make. He did not dare to do anything but indicate that he had received an "offer" of release.

Niedre was transported from Butyrka back to Riga, and no one said any more about a possible release.

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He waited again in a cell - then suddenly ("I remember it was the last of Advent"), a new prisoner train with a secret destination. In an envelope he received a piece of hard bread and three salted herring, the only fare he got, except for water, during the three-day trip.

In Kalinin, northwest of Moscow, Niedre's Soviet hell came. He suffered through Christmas and New Year's hungry, cold and feverish.

He asked for food, "You will get your Swedish share" an officer told him laughingly, and let him starve for more than 24 hours.

"Here are your new friends" the guards told him and pushed him into a dark, cold, and stinking cell. Niedre felt he could not breathe. He could not even answer when he was addressed by the four "regular" criminals already in the cell.

He ran a high temperature but it took quite some time before he was given any medication. The food rations got smaller by the day, and finally consisted only of a small bowl of macaroni and cold water.

It was in the Kalinin prison that he heard stories about camp risings and executions. Niedre says that his Russian is very poor, but his fellow prisoners' stories were clear and supplemented with gestures.

On the 60th anniversary, in 1977, of the Russian revolution, they said the prisoners revolted in camps all over the Soviet Union. The punishments were severe. Many people were executed in the camps. Reports about strikes and uprisings in camps reach the Western world from time to time.

It was in the Kalinin Prison that Niedre was tormented. There the fear came over him and even today he finds it hard to talk about how the prison guards behaved.

It is in the continued story - after Kalinin - that he carefully lists what type of food he got. After having been on the edge of starvation, he entered the phase in the life of a Soviet prisoner when food becomes the most important thing of all. The meals become survival stations.

Thus, he remembers the camps - Yaroslavl, (heavy pea soup, mashed potatoes with fish, sweet tea, "very refreshing"), Gorky, (good soups, every day a leg of chicken,) and Potma (plenty of good food, clean beds, wooden floors).

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The Swedish "spy," Laimons Niedre, came to the "archipelago" 300 kilometers east of Moscow. A railway track led straight into desolated areas where there were nothing but guards, prisoners and their relatives, camps every other kilometer, fences, dogs, and barbed wire in a beautiful landscape with birch woods.

After the days of horror in Kalinin, the camps seemed inviting. Life was "alright". Dressed in a prison outfit - black jacket, boots and fur hat with ear-muffs, the Swede passed his time sleeping, reading and watching TV.

But the feeling of uncertainty lingered. The closed-in, passive life got on his nerves. He had ten years to go.

On March 3, the letters arrived, postmarked three months earlier. He cried when he read them. Marja Niedre - his ex-wife - wrote: Everybody is backing you up.

"Not until then did I understand that something was being done for me in Sweden."

The time passed very slowly until Tuesday of last week. He was in his bed, half asleep, when the political officer came in with "a strangely friendly expression on his face".

"You have been pardoned. You are free. You are going home."

Niedre cannot keep his voice steady. He remembers how he started to cry, how his fellow prisoners came to him and congratulated him.

Pardon. The word clearly indicated that it had been a political decision. Why? And why right now?

The Kremlin will not say anything aside from the reference they have made to "humanitarian reasons". And yet, Laimons Niedre was far from sick. He has an old lung injury and he needs diet foods, but he appears to be strong and alert.

The Niedre case is closed, but the mystery as to how it was resolved will remain. It has elements of political naiveté and political calculation of KGB revenge against Baltic exile organizations in the unsuspecting neutral countries.

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The person who was caught in all this is Laimons Niedre, a 54-year old, Latvian-born Swede. As a school boy in Riga, he was shocked when Soviet tanks came in and took over Latvia. Ever since that day he has hated the system.

Now he sits in his one-room apartment in Tumba, fighting the difficult nightmare pictures as he tries to understand what actually happened.

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